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## **TAY SON UPRISING (1771-1802) IN VIETNAM: MANDATED BY HEAVEN?**

*This article attempts to explore the extent to which the concept of 'mandate from heaven' was exploited by the Tay Son brothers to justify their uprising against the Nguyen family in southern Vietnam and the Trinh in the north. The Nguyen and Trinh families each claimed to be the trustee of the Le dynasty of Vietnam. This study traces the background of the Tay Son brothers who triggered the rebellion and explains the legitimacy of their uprising. It is significant to delve into this event as the Tay Son Uprising was the only one in Vietnamese history which brought down a legitimate dynasty, recognised by China. In addition to using secondary sources written by scholars from China, Vietnam and the West, primary sources on genealogy, the royal edicts from the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies and the writings of the Western travellers who had the opportunity to explore Vietnam in the 19th century were consulted.*

**Keywords:** *Tay Son Uprising, Nguyen Hue, Mandate from Heaven, Nguyen and Le Dynasty.*

### **Introduction**

The Tay Son brothers namely Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Hue and Nguyen Lu led an uprising in the Tay Son village in 1771. According to the record by Philippe Binh, an emissary of the northern Vietnamese Jesuit community in the first decades of the 19th century, many called them the Tay Son brothers because they came from the village of the same name.<sup>1</sup> The rebellion, therefore, is known as the Tay Son Uprising. The insurgency was also known by other names such as *khoi nghĩa Tay Son* [the Tay Son Righteous Uprising]; *cách mạng Tay Son* [The Tay Son Revolution]; *phong trào Tay Son* [the Tay Son Movement] and sometimes as Tay Son-Nguyen Hue. For the purpose of this writing, the name 'Tay Son Uprising' will be used when discussing the movement.

The Tay Son uprising was a cataclysmic event that greatly altered the 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese political and social landscape. It emerged during the period in which Vietnam had been partitioned into two parts along the Gianh River: the Trinh family controlled the north and the Nguyen family, the south. However, the uprising has not received the attention it deserves as

one of the major episodes of 18th century Southeast Asian and East Asian history as pointed out by Alexander Woodside.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it could be argued that this rebellion inaugurates modern Vietnamese history. Therefore, the Tay Son period is significant not merely because of the complex social dynamics that so profoundly shaped it, or its duration and enormous impact on the Vietnamese people. It is important for making a point of historical rupture, even as its internal dynamics recapitulated fundamental themes that had long served to shape the trajectory of Vietnamese history as claimed by George Dutton.<sup>3</sup>

The motivation for this revolution was diverse. A common response to economic pressure and social injustice is a revolution. Even minor natural disasters can sometimes lead to disastrous famines. Nguyen Khac Vien (2007) provides a conventional Vietnamese historian's description of the revolt as the corruption of the feudal regimes and the rise of the peasantry whereas Tran Trong Kim (1992) focuses chiefly on the political and military events. It marks one of the first acknowledgements of the Tay Son regime as a legitimate dynasty. It is striking, however, that the author virtually ignores the causes of the rebellion.

Based on her research findings, Li Tana (1998), tries to explain the Tay Son insurrection within the context of the Nguyen reign in southern Vietnam (Dang Trong). The author argues that previous approaches to the cause of the outbreak of this rebellion impose modern 'political myths and symbols' on the past, often in the service of Marxism and nationalism. Li Tana argues that rather than see the uprising as a manifestation of a general trend, it makes more sense to see it in its local context, in terms of the development and response to the Nguyen rule. Her argument is often compelling. But once again, given that Li Tana is attacking the scholarship on the most discussed rebellion in Vietnamese history, Shawn McHale for instance, requesting more details from the author in order to contribute another piece of Vietnamese history especially during the reign of Tay Son.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, this article attempts to explore how the operation of the tributary system during the Sino-Vietnamese relations is of particular significance. This article will argue more broadly by not just looking at the Tay Son uprising as a peasant movement but also examining the validity of the uprising within the concept of 'mandate from heaven' which was exploited by the Tay Son brothers to rationalise the uprising. It is, therefore, timely that while not much has been written about it, this study will fill the gap by addressing the legitimacy of the Tay Son uprising in order to contribute another piece to the jigsaw in our understanding of Vietnamese history.

Tay Son – meaning 'western mountains,' the name referred to the village's location near where the uplands rise from the coastal littoral near Qui Nhon in a kingdom then known to the Vietnamese as Dang Trong (the Inner Region), to the Europeans as Cochinchina.<sup>5</sup> The ancestors of the Tay Son brothers were originally from Quynh Doi (Quynh Luu district in Nghe

An province). They were captured in 1653 by Thinh Duc (1653 – 1658) from the Nguyen rulers during the battle between the Nguyen and Trinh, two ruling families in Vietnam. As prisoners of war, they were deployed as forced labour to explore and open military areas (don dien) in Hung Nguyen, Nghe Anh Province.<sup>6</sup>

The long span of Vietnamese history claimed that four generations before Nguyen Hue and his siblings had been in the area for some time. At first, they settled in Tay Son Nhat, Quy Ninh district in the city of Quy Nho. However, when it came to the generation of Nguyen Phi Phuc (also known as Ho Phi Phuc), the clan had moved to Kien Thanh, Tuy Vien district (Kien My in Binh Thanh district in Tay Son) in the province of Binh Dinh. Nguyen Phi Phuc, father of the Tay Son brothers was the leader of the Ho clan and was in the business of trading betel leaves and areca nuts. He was married to Nguyen Thi Dong.<sup>7</sup> The Ho clan were the descendants of Ho Quy Ly, the famous late-fourteenth and early fifteenth-century military official, who seized power from the declining Tran court (1225-1400), and set up an illegal government which briefly ruled the country before the 1407 Ming Dynasty invasion. However, the brothers adopted the family name of their mother's 'Nguyen' clan to justify that they had family ties with the legitimate heir to the Nguyen rule in South Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

According to the Vietnamese scholar, Tran Trong Kim, by claiming that they were from the 'Nguyen' clan, they had the intention of gaining public support for their cause.<sup>9</sup> The attempt to justify the use of the surname 'Nguyen' was vital to the Tay Son brothers because the reign of Ho Quy Ly and later his son, Ho Han Thuong did not get the recognition of the people and is still considered a dark point in the history of Vietnam. Vietnamese scholars like Ngo Si Lien (1400 - 1497), Ngo Thi Si (1726-1780), Le Quy Don (1726 -1784) and Phan Huy Chu (1782-1840) who wrote the Vietnamese official history condemned the coup by Ho Quy Ly.<sup>10</sup> The official court history of Vietnam, *Kham Dinh Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc* (The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Viet) recorded that the unpopular Ho Quy Ly, was likened to Zhu Di (Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty, 1402-1424) who seized power from his nephew Zhu Yunwen (1399-1402). Ho Quy Ly was blamed for the annexation of Vietnam by the Ming Emperor of China after he had learnt about the treason committed by Ho Quy Ly.<sup>11</sup>

The father of the Tay Son siblings realised that the sanctity of the family's name could help them gain the respect of the people and enhance their status in society. It was also a means to gain a foothold in Vietnam's political arena because the prevailing practice of Confucianism in Vietnam defined its social and political order. Confucianism emphasizes good character by keeping the relationship between human beings in heaven and on earth on good terms. The followers are taught to remember their ancestors as though they are still around. The teachings are a series of philosophies and etiquette

that teach exemplary human behaviour. Thus, amongst the eight values of charity (ba de) are loyalty (zhong), pure heart (lian), politeness (chi) and trustworthiness (xin) of a people towards their country. The Tay Son brothers' reputation could be compromised by their notorious ancestor, Ho Quy Ly who executed a coup d'état and assassinated the heir of the Tran dynasty. His cruel deed was frequent topic of conversation among the Vietnamese. Therefore, the switch in surname from Ho to Nguyen was crucial.

## **Early Years of the Tay Son Brothers**

Nguyen Phi Phuc was very concerned about his children's education. He provided sufficient education for them in the Yen Thai hamlet (Binh Khe district, Binh Dinh province) to ensure that they would become knowledgeable as well as to hone their leadership skills from young. He realised that illiterate landlords found it difficult to become noblemen. In those days, a Vietnamese landlord, for example, who did not spend his free time pursuing knowledge, might not be considered a nobleman.<sup>12</sup> Such a belief was influenced by Confucius' philosophy which emphasises that humans should have good morals and be humane to ensure peace and prosperity on earth. High moral principles can be achieved through education to produce a gentleman (junzi) who puts the welfare of the country first before his personal interests.

The Tay Son brothers were fortunate to have the opportunity to receive guidance from a scholar named Truong Van Hien. Truong Van Hien had fled to Yen Thai hamlet to avoid getting involved in the political power struggle between his best friends Truong van Hanh and Truong Phuc Loan. Truong Van Hien was asked by Truong Van Hanh to write a letter of appeal to Lord Nguyen Phuc Thuan (1765-1778) to capture Truong Phuc Loan and his followers. However, Truong Van Hien chose to avoid the palace power conflict. He fled to Yen Thai hamlet where he met up with Nguyen Phi Phuc. Truong Van Hien could sense the special traits of the Tay Son brothers. Hence, he gave them his full devotion and guidance in the areas of learning including the appreciation of poetry, books of literature and the arts of war and self-defence.<sup>13</sup>

Of the three brothers, Nguyen Hue was the most prominent intellectually and in his leadership skills. Nguyen Hue was portrayed as having a firm and loud voice, curly hair, thick skin and a sharp vision. His strength was such that he could carry a tonne (1000kg) of rice on his shoulder. In addition, he was quick to grasp what was taught by Truong Van Hien.<sup>14</sup> Encouraged by Truong Van Hien, Nguyen Hue devoted himself to studying military and martial arts. In all fields, he proved to be so brilliant that Truong Van Hien, experienced and presumptuous as he was, could not but be astounded. Greatly impressed, Truong Van Hien encouraged Nguyen Hue to rise up against the corrupted authorities in order to save the miserable people. He also called

upon Nguyen Hue to “hold up the flag of Tay Son Uprising to save the nation; to raise oneself to be a famous emperor in order to capture the hearts of the masses.”<sup>15</sup> The eldest, Nguyen Nhac, on the other hand, was seen as a stubborn and ruthless politician. However, the few years he had spent in the civil service as a tax collector (*tam bien lai*) in Van Don had acquainted him with certain scholar-officials on whom he could later call to lend support to his movement.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, his experience as a betel nut trader had given him the opportunity to conduct business with minority groups such as the Cham and Tehir tribes in the highlands. He even got to marry Thi Hoa, the princess of the old royal kingdom of Champa. By inducing the Cham princess to join their movement, the Tay Son brothers were able to bring a sizeable number of Chams into their army. For the Chams, the Tay Son Uprising might have presented an opportunity to restore some of their former political strength while for the Tay Son siblings, the Chams and Tehir semi-autonomous political centres constituted an alternative site of political power to be drawn upon in their struggle with the Nguyens.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the marriage of Nguyen Nhac was not only seen as uniting the lowlanders, represented by the Kinh and Thuong tribes but also as gaining the support of the upland community, represented by the Tay tribes. He now turned to them for an absolutely essential requirement of the rebellion: a well-sheltered base where government troops rarely ventured.<sup>18</sup>

From 1695 to 1771, there were several insurrections; the ethnic minorities in the highlands and the traders had risen four times to revolt against the Nguyen ruler. In 1695 a trader named Linh succeeded in conquering Quang Ngai and Qui Nhon. In 1708, the Baria minority rose to rebel. In 1747, a trader named Ly Van Quang together with 300 minority groups conquered Bien Hoa, and in 1770, the Ser minority rebelled in Quang Ngai.<sup>19</sup> It was then not surprising that the Tay Son brothers could easily gain support from a diverse group of Vietnamese when they claimed that the reason for their uprising was to get rid of the corrupted and greedy officers.

### **Examining The Causes of the Tay Son Brothers Uprising**

The Tay Son brothers' principle and main slogan was to steal from the rich to give to the poor (*lay cua nha giau ghia cho dan ngheo*). Nguyen Van Nhac who regularly met with the people had the opportunity to see their suffering as a result of the officers' greed. Truong Buu Lam claimed that Nguyen Nhac's experience in public administration gave him room to persuade the scholars and civil servants to support him.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, in every village which was conquered by the Tay Son brothers, the greedy landlord and corrupted government officials were punished and their properties forfeited. Le Roy writes:

*Those southern men (Nguyen Hue's troop) had applied strictly the regulations – they [Tay Son Brother] executed the thieves or those who were prosecuted as thieves. Everybody was pleased with such punishment, and the righteousness of the Tay Son's troop was admired.*<sup>21</sup>

Truong Buu Lam stated that the slogan which served as a warning, quickly became the most effective slogan of the Tay Son brothers.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in Southern Vietnam (Dang Trong), due to rising taxes and widespread corruption, they had the full support of the people of Dang Trong.<sup>23</sup> Scholars like Nguyen Khac Vien and Li Tana also recorded that the main factor for the uprising was the outrageous increase in the taxes. The Nguyen rulers increased the rental tax in 1723, 1725, 1728, 1740 and 1760. In 1770, they further increased the tax revenue by taking as much as possible especially from the traders. The records of Cao Xa village in Thuan Hao province (near Hue) showed that out of 53 registered adults residing there, while nine were exempted, the other 44 paid taxes every year, totalling 138 strings of coins (the price of a large buffalo was 40 strings in difficult times). Not counting contributions in kind, the Nguyen court collected yearly between 338 000 and 423 000 strings of coins, between 840 and 890 ounces of gold, and many thousands of ounces of silver. Li Tana and Nguyen Khac Vien pointed out that for every sum collected for the country, the officials took twice as much for themselves.<sup>24</sup> The circle of those in power were the landlords and the nobles who collaborated to reap profits from the blood and sweat of the people. To the powerful, gold was sand and rice was mud.<sup>25</sup>

Li Tana argues that the Tay Son Uprising was not a “peasant movement” but rather a “provincial revolt,” characterized by the substantial involvement of disaffected upland groups.<sup>26</sup> The uprising, though generally described as an insurgence to restore the rights of the peasants who had been robbed and oppressed by the feudal lords, it succeeded in garnering over three thousand supporters, comprising not only peasants but also other commoners who had long been plagued by poverty and social depravity. Charles Maybon (1919) and Tran Trong Kim (1992) disagreed. They believed that the reason of social depravity as claimed by Nguyen Nhac was made up only to justify his act of rebellion against the Nguyen ruler.<sup>27</sup> Instead, they believed that it was Nguyen Nhac's personal reason that was the main factor for the uprising. This is because Nguyen Nhac, a tax collector, had squandered the tax he had collected on gambling.<sup>28</sup> He then brought his brothers to seek refuge in the hills and live in exile for fear of being punished by the authorities for breach of trust.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the reason, what is obvious is that the movement garnered support from various groups; the ethnic minorities in the highlands, scholars, mandarins, village administrative officers, rich traders such as Huyen Khe

and Nguyen Thung from Qiu Nhon and the Chinese merchants. In Thomas Hodgkin's opinion, the Tay Son brothers achieved this through legitimising their rebellion by spreading the decree that their mission was to liberate the people from the clutches of the tyrannical Truong Phuc Loan and to give support to Nguyen Phuc Duong, Prince Nguyen Phuc Khoat, who was exiled by Truong Phuc Loan, as their virtuous Nguyen ruler.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Truong Phuc Loan's government was labelled as being illegal, harsh, corrupted and the main cause of the chaos in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> His untold wealth was depicted as the gold, put out to dry after a flood, that covered the entire compound of his house.<sup>32</sup> Because of his injustice and corrupted ways, he was likened to Truong Tan Coi (Zhang Qinkuai), a minister during China's Song dynasty who was cruel and oppressive.<sup>33</sup> Apart from that, the Tay Son brothers also declared that they supported equality among the people in every aspect such as social and economic.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, various theories have been advanced to explain the cause of the resistance movement by the peasants. Among the well-known theories in the context of South-East Asia is the moral theory of economics by James C. Scott, the theory of rational farmers by Samuel L. Popkin and the theory of 'state contest' by Michael Adas. When the case of the resistance of the Tay Son brothers is reviewed, Adas' arguments appear to be admissible in the discussion. Taking an approach between Scott and Popkin, Adas states in his work *Moral Economy or Contest State* (1980) 'the role of ethical consideration cannot be denied in traditional economic relations but emphasises that its contribution is limited. The most important element that characterises this economic relationship is the competition between all those involved in order to obtain as much as possible from the production of the farmers. When they fail and discover that the means of self-defence is ineffective, they involve themselves in the resistance movement.'<sup>35</sup>

The relevance of this argument is seen in Vietnam where uprisings often occurred after the country was hit by devastating natural disasters such as famine, pestilence, drought or flood. For Wang Lida, the elements of politics and economy are prominent reasons.<sup>36</sup> The oppressive economic condition and rampant corruption of the Nguyen rulers were the highlighted elements in legalizing the Tay Son Uprising. These elements led to moments of decline and instability of the government which presented a powerful weapon for the rebels to depose the rulers. Such unwelcome elements, which beset the government of Vietnam, were also among the prominent features in the cycle of Chinese dynasties. Surely the abundant presence of such elements would ultimately lead to the loss of mandate from heaven for the existing rule. A ruling dynasty should follow the principles of benevolence (*ren*) such as the feelings of love and humanity that would make the policy beneficial to all the people in order to achieve peace and satisfaction in the universe under heaven (*tian*). Thus, as the rebels moved from village to village, they proclaimed to the rural society,



covering ninety-five percent of the country's population, that they were not revolting but were sent from heaven to seek justice. As it was claimed by Ngo Thi Nham (1746 – 1803), a dignitary of the Tay Son brothers, the rise and fall of the brothers was determined by heaven and it had nothing to do with the number of soldiers they had.<sup>37</sup> In truth, the Tay Son brothers applied the Confucius philosophy to legitimise their uprising. However, another reason for resorting to the Confucius doctrine to justify their rebellion was the notion that the Tay Son brothers were originally from the highlands which the Confucius scholars claimed to be uncivilized areas (*cho man di*). As Li Tana had analysed, to avoid the stigma of being labelled as uncultured, to gain support and to justify the validity of Dang Trong's captivity, Nguyen Nhac portrayed the family as being related to the descendants of the ethnic Cham. He used a red symbol on his flag and declared himself the king of Vijaya, the capital of Champa. Moreover, Nguyen Nhac's decision to use the ancient Cham capital of Vijaya as his own political centre clearly reflected this logic.<sup>38</sup>

According to Confucius' teachings, as an offspring of heaven, a king is obligated to rule in a virtuous, just and wise manner while being responsible for ensuring a favourable quality of life for all the people. A divine mandate gave the Vietnamese emperor the right to rule, but it was based on his ability to govern and not his lineage.<sup>39</sup> Should the king fail to fulfil his obligation, the mandate of heaven shall be withdrawn and the loss of mandate is mirrored in the occurrence of natural disasters such as floods and droughts. In such a situation, the people are right to rebel and overthrow the king. It is the will of heaven to justify a new government as being legitimate and recognized. Therefore,

*"Floods, droughts and other catastrophes are indicative of disharmony and the disapproval of heaven. They are sign that it is the time for cach mang or "change of mandate," the literal Vietnamese expression for revolution."*<sup>40</sup>

The adoption in Vietnam of a Confucian bureaucracy ruled by a Son of Heaven led to the creation of a Vietnamese tributary system in Southeast Asia modelled on the Chinese Sinocentric system in East Asia.<sup>41</sup> Thus, according to George Dutton, the Tay Son brothers had to brand their group as *khoi nghĩa* (righteous uprising), *nhĩa quân* (righteous troops), *ông nghĩa* (righteous men), *đức anh* (virtuous brothers) and so on in order to gain the people's support for their movement.<sup>42</sup> They continued to use the doctrine even after they had gained support. In February 1774, a Spanish missionary, Diego de Jumilla, reported "they announced to the villagers that they were not bandits, but that they were carrying out a war to obey the will of heaven."<sup>43</sup> A French missionary also reported that, "[the Tay Son leaders] then spread a thousand tales of dreams and revelations of signs from heaven, which they said proved their mission."<sup>44</sup>



In 1788, Charles Chapman reported that Nguyen Nhac had claimed that the rise of the Tay Son brothers was God's will to make them a means to free the people and to be raised as ruler.<sup>45</sup>

These early references make it clear that the rebel leaders were popularising their interpretation of the will of heaven at the very outset of their uprising. These reports indicate that the Tay Son brothers continued to underscore the purported support of heaven and that they felt it important to make this point clear even to the European visitors. Their insistence suggests that the Tay Son brothers saw this form of political legitimation as fundamental to their overall mission.

### **Triumph in South Vietnam**

In the 18th century, Vietnam was divided between two ruling seignorial families. The Trinh in the north controlled the area centred on the Red River Delta with their capital at Thang Long (Ha Noi). The south was ruled by the Nguyens, whose nominal authority extended into the Mekong Delta and their capital was at Phu Xuen (Hue). In 1771, the Tay Son brothers rose up against the Nguyen ruler and easily captured An Khe, the gateway between Qui Nhon and Trung Son highland in Binh Thuan. An Khe was made their headquarters due to its ideal location in a remote area with narrow and dangerous passages which made it difficult for the ruling power to contain the rebellion at the early stage. In addition, An Khe together with the coastal ports in Qui Nhon, bordering Campa to the south constituted an important trade route. Its location was ideal for the collection of various items such as timber, iron, sulphur, horses and elephants from the highlands.<sup>46</sup>

The successful conquest of An Khe by the Tay Son brothers weakened the Nguyen family's control of the uprising. Their next move was to conquer the customs headquarters at the border area in Qui Nhon. However, the spies for the Tay Son brothers reported that the Nguyen family was prepared to defend their fort in Qui Nhon which was tightly guarded. This left Nguyen Nhac no choice but to use deception to sneak into the guarded fort. He pretended to be captured by his soldiers who were supposed to have defected to the Nguyen army. Nguyen Khac Tuyen, the Governor of Qui Nhon kept him in prison while awaiting his sentence. However, during the night, Nguyen Nhac's soldiers came into the fort easily as its gate was already opened by the so-called traitors. His troops attacked Qui Nhon and conquered it in 1773. This victory allowed Nguyen Nhac to declare himself as Tay Son Vuong (King Tay Son) and build a capital in Qui Nhon. The success of conquering Qui Nhon was attributed by Liang Zhiming to Nguyen Nhac's intelligence in employing the strategies of Sun Tzu, a Chinese military strategist during the Spring and Autumn period (722-403).<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, this success was a stepping stone for the Tay

Son brothers to expand their power to areas along the coastline from Quang Nghia to Binh Thuan. This early victory encouraged Nguyen Nhac to get his younger brother, Nguyen Lu to launch an attack on Gia Dinh (Sai Gon) via the sea. Nguyen Lu was triumphant in his mission when his opponents, Nguyen Phuc Duong and Nguyen Phuc Thuan, were killed in the battle. This forced the Nguyen ruler to flee to Bien Hoa to save himself. However, the Tay Son brothers' victory was only temporary as Do Thanh Nhan, Nguyen's general managed to drive them away from Dong Son. This forced the Tay Son brothers to abandon Gia Dinh but before leaving, Nguyen Lu seized all the food and belongings of the place and brought the loot back to Qui Nhon. Then in 1774, the Nguyen family through General Tong Phuc Hiep won back Binh Thuan, Dien Khanh and Binh Khang. This left the Tay Son brothers only the area from Phu Yen to Quang Ngai.<sup>48</sup>

However, by 1776, Gia Dinh was once again conquered by the Tay Son brothers through Nguyen Lu. Everyone of the ruling Nguyen's descendants was killed except Nguyen Phuc Anh, the 16 year-old nephew of Nguyen Phuc Thuan who escaped to Ha-tien. By 1778, the Tay Son brothers had conquered the whole of Quang Nam including Gia Din. To justify their deed of wiping out the whole Nguyen family, they continued to try to convince outsiders such as Father Ginestar, a missionary from Spain, that the reason they rebelled was because "heaven had entrusted this kingdom to them," whereby the kingdom in question was the Nguyen realm of Dang Trong. They had been upset by the relationship between the West and Nguyen Phuc Anh who was supplied with war material and artillery by his Western ally.<sup>49</sup>

Having vanquished the Nguyen power, Nguyen Nhac ascended the throne with the title *Thai Duc* and built his capital city in Do Ban (Binh Dinh Province). Nguyen Hue was appointed general with the title *Long Nhuong*. In 1782, Nguyen Hue defeated Nguyen Phuc Anh's troops. After that, the domination of Gia Dinh alternated between the two sides until 1783 when the Tay Son brothers managed to cripple the entire troop of Nguyen Phuc Anh who was forced to flee to Phu Quoc Island (Con Dao) with the help of a French priest (Bishop of Adran), Bishop Pigneau de Behaine (1741-1799).<sup>50</sup> The episode of Pigeau helping Nguyen Phuc Anh will not be discussed in this paper.

## Temporary Setback

In 1786, the Tay Son rebels turned their attention to North Vietnam to recapture the Nguyen territories occupied by the Trinh family. Unfortunately for the Tay Son brothers, not long after that, they themselves were defeated by the Trinh troops led by Trinh Sam. With the strength of 30,000 soldiers, he marched to Dang Trong with the excuse of helping the late Le family to overthrow Truong Phuc Loan. The Trinh army did not experience any great resistance in their march towards Phu Xuan. The Tay Son brothers were defeated at the Hai Van

Valley (Tran Ninh Wall). Consequently, Nguyen Nhac, worried that his men would face a two-pronged attack by the Trinh and Nguyen families, suggested to General Hoang Ngu Phuc of Trinh that he and his brothers were willing to assist the Trinh to fight the Nguyen family. The suggestion was well received and so an alliance was forged. Nguyen Nhac was then acknowledged as a Trinh officer.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, Nguyen Hue tried to make peace with Tong Phuc Hiep from the Nguyen family. Nguyen Van Chat, a messenger of the Tay Son brothers informed Tong Phuc Hiep that Nguyen Hue had always been impressed by his talent and sought his cooperation to defend their land from being attacked by the Trinh. He added that the Tay Son brothers' mission was to support Nguyen Phuc Duong Trung and his heirs. Needless to say, the greedy Trung Phuc Loan was killed by them.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, the diplomacy ploy of the Tay Son brothers had two agendas. By allying themselves with both sides, the brothers not only had the time to strengthen their army but also managed to put both the Trinh and Nguyen families in a vulnerable state during this peace period. Nguyen Nhac knew that the peace treaty was only temporary, so he continued to train his army, hiring new soldiers secretly while improving control of the castle at Don Ban as well as building new fortification with the intention of launching a new attack when the time was right. The Tay Son brothers, led by Nguyen Hue, dealt a blow to Tong Phuc Hiep's force which was unprepared and unable to fight back. Tong Phuc Hiep together with his nephew fled to Phong Van.<sup>53</sup>

## **Triumph in North Vietnam**

Meanwhile, Thuan Hoa, which was under the supervision of Pham Ngo Cau, a governor of Trinh, was stricken by famine while in Bac Ho (Northwest Vietnam), the situation resulting from the death of king Trinh Sam was still chaotic. The king's death in 1782 led to fighting between Trinh Can and Trinh Khai. Trinh Can, who ascended the throne as the crown prince, was only four years old. He was the son of King Trinh Sam and his favourite concubine, Dang Thi Hue. However, as soon as Trinh Sam died, Trinh Khai staged a coup against Trinh Can with the help of Kieu Binh and the court officials.<sup>54</sup> Kieu Binh had control of the traditional elite soldiers who had been recruited from three provinces, namely Ha Trung, Thieu Hoa and Tinh Gia in Thanh Hoa (Nghe An Province). The court officials were highly respected by society as they were originally from the Le's ancestral home. In addition, the fact that they were the first scholars to support the Trinh gained them the trust and support of the local society.

However, gradually, the involvement of Kieu Binh and the higher officials in robbery and murder went out of control, causing suffering and anguish among the folks of Bac Ha. Under such circumstances, to determine

the heir to replace Trinh Sam, Trinh Khai and Trinh Can were pitted against each other. The residents in particular the poor and the peasants, who had suffered because of the civil war, were also unfairly burdened with heavy taxes, although they enjoyed freedom under the governance of Trinh Sam.<sup>55</sup> It was even worse when in 1786, famine fell upon Bac Ha. Kieu Binh's abuse of power on top of the economic burden and natural disaster endured by the people was exploited by the Tay Son brothers. They realized that what seemed like an insignificant situation of poor irrigation systems and drainage but which had direct impact on the people's lives provided them with the best opportunity to establish their authority with a claimed mandate from heaven.

That was not all. Nguyen Huu Chinh, former general of the Trinh family also urged the Tay Son brothers to intervene in the political affairs in Dang Ngoai. His main reason was his disappointment with the Trinh's failure to keep their promise to proclaim the late Le's heir as kind. Instead, he saw the struggle for power and widespread corruption among the Trinh officials.<sup>56</sup> Initially, Nguyen Hue was reluctant to act especially without any instructions from Nguyen Nhac. Nguyen Huu Chinh insisted that 'what was to be obtained would be his (Nguyen Hue's) returns, and in a critical situation, what was more important was to gain something from the defeated.'<sup>57</sup> He continued that in a war, the commander should have more power than the king. He also pointed out that the Trinh ruler was, after all, a despot. The people hated him and given all these reasons, it was vital for Nguyen Hue to overthrow the Trinh in favour of the heir of the late Le.<sup>58</sup>

Eventually, at the instigation of Nguyen Huu Chinh, in April 1786 Nguyen Hue and his men marched across the Gianh River and came to Thang Long on 21st July 1786. Nguyen Hue took only ten days to conquer Vi Hoang, Pho Hien dan Thang Long. This drove Hoang Nghia Ho, Trinh's general to commit suicide. News of the fall of Thuan Hoa upon their reaching Thang Long triggered a series of rebellion, such as, in Quang Yen, Kinh Bac, Thai Binh and Tuyen Quang. Meanwhile, Nguyen Huu Chinh's troops marching along Viet An estuary managed to get into Nghe An which was abandoned by Bui The Tuy, prince of Bui The Dat. Earlier, Ta Danh Thuy, Trinh's general had left Thanh Hoa. Nguyen Huu Chinh's troops arrived at Vi Hoang, the last of Trinh's stronghold before Thang Long was conquered by Nguyen Hue. A fierce battle with artillery fire from the sea and from the junks brought in by the Tay Son brothers ensued. In the end, the Trinh army was defeated in Son Nam (Hung Yen). This victory was achieved through the Tay Son brothers' ruse which made the enemy troops attack the wrong target. The trickery caused their opponents to run out of ammunition and in the end they were forced to surrender. The failure of defending Son Nam was an early sign of Trinh's defeat in Thang Long, the capital and administrative centre of the Trinh's family.<sup>59</sup>

### **Wide Support for the Tay Son Brothers**

The capture of Thang Long basically signifies the crippling of the Trinh family power in northern Vietnam (Dang Ngoai). This victory was deemed by Craig Lockard as the success of the Tay Son brothers to unite the north (Dang Ngoai) and the south (Dang Trong) of Vietnam after the span of 299 years of its history.<sup>60</sup> Nguyen Hue owed his success to the support of the generals like Tran Quang Dieu, Vu Van Dung, Dang Tien Dong and Ngo Van So. Ngo Van So, for instance, in a discussion with Nguyen Hue observed that, 'From ancient times until the present, nothing under heaven had been the private possession of any particular family; if one had the ability to take it, he should go ahead and do so.'<sup>61</sup> In Thang Long, he managed to win the hearts and minds of talented scholars such as Ngo Thi Nham, Phan Huy Ich, Nguyen The Lich, Doan Nguyen Tuan and Nguyen Thiep who were dissatisfied with the dynasty of Le-Trinh. According to George Dutton, the people's sentiments in Dang Ngoia were such that they perceived the Trinh ruler as an 'outsider' which provided them the reason to throw their full support behind the Tay Son brothers.<sup>62</sup>

Over in Phu Xuan, Nguyen Hue received full cooperation from Tran Van Ky, a renown intellect who helped in preparing the administration and defence. As promised to the people of Vietnam at the beginning of the movement, the Tay Son brothers had achieved the goal to restore the Le dynasty's heir to the throne. Hence, Le Hien Tong who had reigned under the domination of the Trinh family since 1740 was finally recognized as king in his own right by the Tay Son brothers although his power was to run only official state ceremonies and protocol. As a reward, on August 1st, 1786, Le Hien Tong conferred Nguyen Hue the title of *Nguyen Soai Uy Quoc Cong* (Generalissimo and Mighty Grand Duke) and even gave his princess, Le Ngoc Han to Nguyen Hue in marriage. While Nguyen Hue succeeded in restoring the throne to the Le's heir in Dang Ngoai, his brothers conquered other parts of Vietnam. Nguyen Hue dominated the north from Pass of Clouds (between Hue and Da Nang) to Thanh Hoa with the title *Bac Binh Vuong* (King of the Pacified North); Nguyen Nhac, who conquered the middle with his capital city established at Qui Nhon, was titled *Trung Uong Hoang De* (Central Emperor); and Nguyen Lu, who conquered the south and presided over Gia Dinh, took the title of *Dong Dinh Vuong* (King of the Settled East).<sup>63</sup>

According to George Dutton, the act of Nguyen Nhac in naming himself as king, in fact, indicated that the Tay Son brothers wanted to sever all political and military ties with the administration of the Nguyen and Trinh families.<sup>64</sup> In other words, the brothers wanted to rule Vietnam independently. However, the fledgling government established by the Tay Son brothers was still incapable of establishing relations with any power outside the country other than within Vietnam (Dang Trong dan Dang Ngoai). Charles Chapman even observed that the administration of Nguyen Nhac was still unstable because,

*While Ignac [Nguyen Nhac] himself admittedly has abilities, the officials, ill-seconded by the Mandarins who govern under him, are all lowly illiterate men chosen from amongst - the inhabitants of his native village of Tyson [Tay Son] who, as soon as they have got into power, have been remarkable only for their perfidy, cruelty and extortion, and are far from acknowledging their dependence on the hand that has raised them.<sup>65</sup>*

## **Successive Take-overs of Thang Long**

In 1787, Nguyen Phuc Anh had the opportunity to be active again at Gia Dinh. Nguyen Hue and his troops had to return to Dang Trong leaving all the administration to King Le Hien Tong. By July 1786, Le Chieu Thong (titled Le Duy Ky after ascending the throne, 1765–1793) was appointed as Giam Quoc (Head of State) to replace Le Hien Tong who had died.<sup>66</sup> Unexpectedly, Trinh Bong and Trinh Le appeared and each claimed to be the heir of the Trinh family. This led Le Chieu Thong to appoint Trinh Bong as a Trinh dignitary to curb the uprising that followed the claims. Not long after, Trinh Bong came to be known as the most powerful and greedy dignitary in Dang Ngoai. Then Le Chieu Thong had to seek help from Nguyen Huu Chinh, Governor of the Tay Son brothers in Nghe An to exile the remnants of the Trinh army. Nguyen Huu Chinh led his army to Thang Long and succeeded in humbling Trinh Bong. However, after gaining power in Dang Ngoai, Nguyen Huu Chinh tried to free himself from the control of the Tay Son brothers. Once again, Dang Ngoai was in a crisis over throne succession. This led Nguyen Hue to instruct his admirals, Vu Van Nham and Ngo Van So to take over Thanh Long by killing Nguyen Huu Chinh.

In turn, Vu Van Nham who was entrusted to look after Thang Long also abused the trust place in him after Nguyen Hue returned to Dang Trong. Once again, Nguyen Hue was forced to order General Ngo Van So and General Phan Van Lan to Thang Long to overthrow Vu Van Nham. Next, Phan Van Lan was appointed govern Dang Ngoai. The coups happened constantly among the generals because there were hints of disunity and disintegration among the Tay Son brothers' troops. The disintegration was obvious when Nguyen Nhac and Nguyen Hue worked out their differences in the battlefield. In 1787, when Nguyen Hue moved his troops to Thang Long, Nguyen Nhac who felt threatened, ordered his brother to return to Gia Dinh. When Nguyen Hue's army approached Qui Nhon, Nguyen Nhac's army besieged them for about three months until they ran out of food supplies.<sup>67</sup> The dispute was soon taken advantage of by Le Chieu Thong to free himself from the shackles of the Tay Son brothers. With the intention to free himself from the control of the brothers in November 1787, Le Chieu Thong moved his soldiers in preparation

to capture Thang Long in the following month.

## **End of Le Dynasty**

While Nguyen Huu Chinh was captured by the Tay Son brothers, Le Chieu Thong managed to slip away to Kinh Bac (Bac Ninh Province) after his failed uprising in Thang Long. However, his arrival was not welcomed by General Nguyen Canh Thuoc. This forced Le Chieu Thong and his followers to move to Bao Loc in the Lam Dong province. This time they were well received by Nguyen Trong Linh. However, Le Chieu Thong's hope to launch a series of resistance against the Tay Son brothers could not be realised because of the lack of financial resources.<sup>68</sup>

He then headed to Nghe An and Thanh Hoa. Over there, he tried to gather supporters in the hope of fighting his enemies but his effort ended in disaster when Dinh Tich Nhuong, a dignitary who had been in the service of eight generations of the Le dynasty, betrayed him. Dinh Tich Nhuong informed the Tay Son brothers of his movements. Finally, Le Chieu Thong sought refuge in Bac Giang. His queen and other family members, fled to Longzhou in Guangxi to seek political asylum from China.<sup>69</sup> At this juncture, China began to place serious focus on the unrest that was happening in Vietnam in its position as the patron of Vietnam, which was its tributary state. The reaction of China at the beginning of the Tay Son brothers' rebellion was more cautious as they tried to avoid direct involvement in the political turmoil in Vietnam.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Any undesirable political, economic or social deviation from the norm often means misery for the people who have to cope with the demands that go beyond the limits of the central government or local authorities to control. When the situation is no longer bearable, the reaction of the people in various forms of resistance will happen. The Tay Son Brothers Uprising in Vietnam discussed in this paper is a case in point. It is the manifestation of popular discontent against the depravity of the existing reign. The rebellion was considered legitimate according to the principles of political ideology. The Tay Son brothers managed to legitimize their revolt as being mandated by heaven in view of the injustice, debauchery and depravity caused by the families of the Nguyen and Trinh rulers. In fact, the governments which they overthrew were mired in appalling corruption scandals which brought suffering and hardships to the people. Thus, the concept of a mandate from heaven played a vital role in the uprising especially when the Tay Son Brothers claimed to put the interests of the people first. To them, the main function of a ruler was to safeguard the interests of his people. When a ruler went against the interests of his people, heaven would confiscate his right to be in power. It is clear that



here the concept of mandate from heaven is given a moral dimension. In sum, the Tay Son brothers' victory in deposing and replacing the Nguyen and Trinh rulers was clearly through invoking the will and command of heaven to defend and justify their deeds.

## Endnotes

1. Details can be found in George Dutton, *A Vietnamese Moses: Philippe Binh and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016.
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10. For further information, see John Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly and the Ming* (1371-1421), New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1985, p. VII.
11. Phan Thanh Gian, *Kham Dinh Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc*, Vol. 41, A.1/1-9.
12. Ha Van Thu-Tran Hong Duc, "Tay Son Dynasty," In. *A Brief Chronology of Vietnam's History*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2000, pp. 169-170.

13. *Ibid.*
14. Nguyen Hue was born in 1753. As a kid, his real name is Ba Thom (Ho Thom). Later he was known as Thom and also Binh. See Do Bang, *Nhung Kham Pha Ve Hoang De Quang Trung* (The Discovery of Emperor Quang Trung), Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa Thong Tin, 2006, pp. 10-12. The writer thanks Vu Duong Luan for translating several parts of the book for writer.
15. In Han-Nom language, it was written 《西起义，北收功，钦西山人，其勉之。》 Words of encouragement given by Trung Van Hien to Nguyen Hue before the Tay Son brothers Uprising - Tay Son Hidden Dragon document 1789, Vietnam National Museum, Hanoi.
16. Uy Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi Viet Nam (ed.), *Lich Su Viet Nam* [History of Vietnam], trans. Beijing Daxue Dongyuxi Yuenan Yu Jiao Yanshi, Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1977, p. 337. [越南社会科学委员会编著，北京大学东语系越南语教研室译，《越南历史》，北京：北京人民出版社。]
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18. Truong Buu Lam, *Resistance Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984, p. 11.
19. *Ibid.* See also Guo Zhenduo & Zhang Xiaomei (eds.), pp. 483-484.
20. Truong Buu Lam, p. 10.
21. “Le Roy missionary letter (Nam Dinh) to Blandin in Paris, 11 July 1786,” [www. Salongcuong. org/bd/bde/qtr.htm](http://www.Salongcuong.org/bd/bde/qtr.htm). [Retrieved 17 June 2016]
22. Truong Buu Lam, p. 11. See also “Mourning” by Le Ngoc Han. “In plain clothes he raised the red banner, helping people in national construction, his merit was immeasurable,” In. Nguyen Quang An & Giang Ha Vi, *Quang Trung Nguyen Hue: A Hero in Plain Clothes*, [www.vietmanitoba.com/vietpeople/quang\\_trung \\_nguyen\\_hue.htm](http://www.vietmanitoba.com/vietpeople/quang_trung _nguyen_hue.htm). [Retrieved 17 June 2016]
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24. Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 1998, pp. 248-153. See also Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam – A Long History*, Hanoi, The Gioi Publishers, 2007, p. 98.
25. Quynh Cu, “Nguyen Hue (1753-1792),” *Outstanding Vietnamese Generals, Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006, p. 250.
26. Li Tana, p. 137.
27. Charles Maybon, *Histoire Moderne du Pays d’Annam (1592-1820)*, Paris: Plon, 1919, In. Maurice Durand, *Histoire des Tay Son*, Paris:

- Indes sa-vantes, 2006, p 23. See also Tran Trong Kim, p. 254.
28. *Tay Son Thuy Mat Ki* (Comprehensive History of Tay Son), [《西山始末記》。] A2787, Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Nom Studies.
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30. Thomas Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1981, p. 85.
31. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc Tien Bien*, Quan 10-12, R777, Hanoi: National Library of Vietnam. [《大南寔錄前編》，卷十二《睿宗孝定皇帝實錄下》。]。
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40. *Memorandum*. California: RAND Corporation, 1961, p. 6.
41. Alexander Woodside, pp. 234-237.
42. George Dutton, "Reassessing Confucianism in the Tay Son Regime (1788-1802)," *South East Asia Research*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2005, pp. 157-183.
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44. George Dutton, 2006, p. 67.
45. Charles Chapman, "Chapman's Narrative of His Mission to Vietnam" in Lamb, Alastair, *The Mandarin Road to Old Hue: Narratives of Anglo-Vietnamese Diplomacy from the 17th Century to the Eve of the*

46. *French Conquest*, London: Chatto & Windus, rpt., 1970, pp. 94-95.
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54. Iwamura Shigemitsu, p. 159.
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57. In 1663, on Trinh Tac's order and King Le Gia Tong, they killed Nguyen Quoc Hoe and destroyed Pham Cong Tru's home. In 1740, Nguyen Canh, mandarin's highest official was killed by Trinh Doanh and Trinh Le Hien Tong. See Iwamura Shigemitsu, pp. 139-140. See also Oscar Chapuis, pp. 145-149
58. According to Confucius, "Disobedience is a small thing in a great enterprise."
59. Liang Zhiming, pp. 55-57.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Craig A. Lockard, *Southeast Asia in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 102.
62. *Nam Su* (Southern History), VHv2743, Hanoi: Institute of Sino-Nom Studies.
63. George Dutton, 2006, p. 164.
64. *Kham Dinh Viet Su Thong Giam Cuong Muc*, Vol. 47.
65. George Dutton, 2006, p. 96.

65. Charles Chapman, p. 101.
66. Le Duy Khiem is the eldest prince of Le Duy Vi, who is the crown prince of Le Hien Tong. When his father was killed by Trinh Sam in 1771. Le Duy Khiem was sent to prison. However in 1783, Trinh Khai lifted Le Duy Khiem as crown prince of the Le Dynasty with the title Le Duy Ky by getting rid of Le Duy Can who was supported by Nguyen Hue and Ngoc Han. When Le Duy Ky became king of Vietnam, he used the title of Le Chieu Thong. See Iwamura Shigemitsu, p. 151.
67. Liang Zhiming, p. 57.
68. *Qing Gaozong Shilu* (Veritable Record of Qing Dynasty), Vol. 1311. See also *Nam Su* (Southern History), VHv2743.
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